

Big Sister Solly

BY MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

IT did seem strange that Molly Westminster, who, according to her own self-estimation, was the least adapted of any woman in the village, should have been the one chosen by a theoretically selective providence to deal with a psychological problem.

It was conceded that little Content Adams was a psychological problem. She was the orphan child of very distant relatives of the rector. When her parents died she had been cared for by a widowed aunt on her mother's side, and this aunt had also borne the reputation of being a creature apart. When the aunt died, in a small village in the indefinite "Out West," the presiding clergyman had notified Edward Westminster of little Content's lonely and helpless estate. The aunt had subsisted upon an annuity which had died with her. The child had inherited nothing except personal property. The aunt's house had been bequeathed to the church over which the clergyman presided, and after her aunt's death he took her to his own home until she could be sent to her relatives, and he and his wife were exceedingly punctilious about every jot and tittle of the aunt's personal belongings. They even purchased two extra trunks for them, which they charged to the rector.

Little Content, traveling in the care of a lady who had known her aunt and happened to be coming East, had six large trunks, besides a hat-box and two suit-cases and a nailed-up wooden box containing odds and ends. Content made quite a sensation when she arrived and her baggage was piled on the station platform.

Poor Molly Westminster unpacked little Content's trunks. She had sent the little girl to school within a few days after her arrival. Lily Jennings and Amelia Wheeler called for her, and aided her down the street between them, arms interlocked. Content, although Molly had done her best with a pretty,

ready-made dress and a new hat, was undeniably a peculiar-looking child. In the first place, she had an expression so odd that it was fairly uncanny.

"That child has downward curves beside her mouth already, and lines between her eyes, and what she will look like a few years hence is beyond me," Molly told her husband after she had seen the little girl go out of sight between Lily's curls and ruffles and ribbons, and Amelia's smooth skirts.

"She doesn't look like a happy child," agreed the rector. "Poor little thing! Her aunt Eudora must have been a queer woman to train a child."

"She is certainly trained," said Molly, ruefully; "too much so. Content acts as if she were afraid to move or speak or even breathe unless somebody signals permission. I pity her."

She was in the storeroom, in the midst of Content's baggage. The rector sat on an old chair, smoking. He had a conviction that it behooved him as a man to stand by his wife during what might prove an ordeal. He had known Content's deceased aunt years before. He had also known the clergyman who had taken charge of her personal property and sent it on with Content.

"Be prepared for finding almost anything, Molly," he observed. "Mr. Zenock Shanksbury, as I remember him, was so conscientious that it amounted to mania. I am sure he has sent simply unspeakable things rather than incur the reproach of that conscience of his with regard to defrauding Content of one jot or tittle of that personal property."

Molly shook out a long, black silk dress, with jet dangling here and there. "Now here is this dress," said she. "I suppose I really must keep this, but when that child is grown up the silk will probably be cracked and entirely worthless."

"You had better take the two trunks and pack them with such things, and take your chances."

"Oh, I suppose so. I suppose I must take chances with everything except furs and wools, which will collect moths. Oh, goodness!" Molly held up an old-fashioned fitch fur tippet. Little vague winged things came from it like dust. "Moths!" said she, tragically. "Moths now! It is full of them. Edward, you need not tell me that clergyman's wife was conscientious. No conscientious woman would have sent an old fur tippet all eaten with moths into another woman's house. She could not."

Molly took flying leaps across the storeroom. She flung open the window and tossed out the mangy tippet. "This is simply awful," she declared, as she returned. "Edward, don't you think we are justified in having Thomas take all these things out in the back yard and making a bonfire of the whole lot?"

"No, my dear."

"But, Edward, nobody can tell what will come next. If Content's aunt had died of a contagious disease, nothing could induce me to touch another thing."

"Well, dear, you know that she died from the shock of a carriage accident, because she had a weak heart."

"I know it, and of course there is nothing contagious about that." Molly took up an ancient handbox and opened it. She displayed its contents: a very frivolous bonnet dating back in style a half-century, gay with roses and lace and green strings, and another with a heavy crape veil dependent. "You certainly do not advise me to keep these?" asked Molly, despondently.

Edward Westminster looked puzzled. "Use your own judgment," he said, finally.

Molly summarily marched across the room and flung the gay bonnet and the mournful one out of the window. Then she took out a bundle of very old underwear which had turned a saffron yellow with age. "People are always coming to me for old linen in case of burns," she said, succinctly. "After these are washed I can supply an *auto da fe*."

Poor Molly worked all that day and several days afterward. The rector deserted her, and she relied upon her own good sense in the disposition of little Content's legacy. When all was over she told her husband.

"Well, Edward," said she, "there is exactly one trunk half full of things which the child may live to use, but it is highly improbable. We have had six bonfires, and I have given away three suits of old clothes to Thomas's father. The clothes were very large."

"Must have belonged to Eudora's first husband. He was a stout man," said Edward.

"And I have given two small suits of men's clothes to the Aid Society for the next out-West barrel."

"Eudora's second husband's."

"And I gave the washwoman enough old baking-dishes to last her lifetime, and some cracked dishes. Most of the dishes were broken, but a few were only cracked; and I have given Silas Thomas's wife ten old wool dresses and a shawl and three old cloaks. All the other things which did not go into the bonfires went to the Aid Society. They will go back out West." Molly laughed, a girlish peal, and her husband joined. But suddenly her smooth forehead contracted. "Edward," said she.

"Well, dear?"

"I am terribly puzzled about one thing."

The two were sitting in the study. Content had gone to bed. Nobody could hear easily, but Molly Westminster lowered her voice, and her honest, clear blue eyes had a frightened expression.

"What is it, dear?"

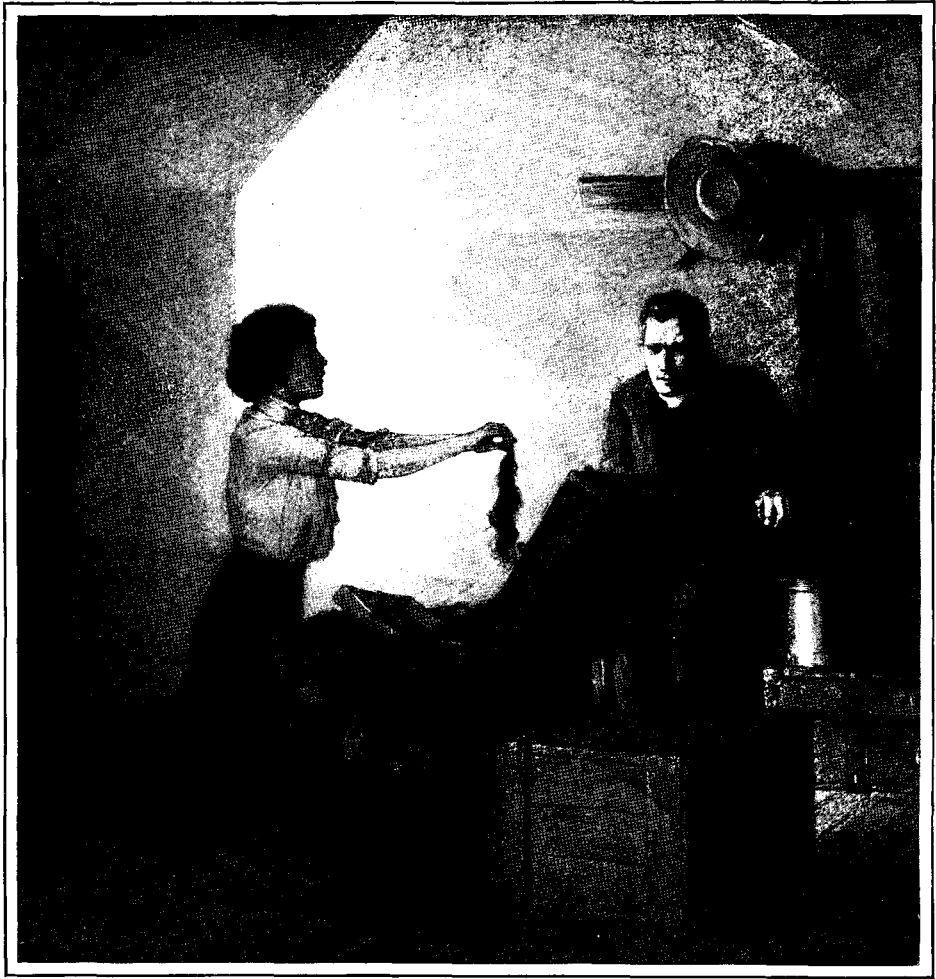
"You will think me very silly and cowardly, and I think I have never been cowardly, but this is really very strange. Come with me. I am such a goose, I don't dare go alone to that storeroom."

The rector rose. Molly switched on the lights as they went up-stairs to the storeroom. "Tread very softly," she whispered. "Content is probably asleep."

The two tiptoed up the stairs and entered the storeroom. Molly approached one of the two new trunks which had come with Content from out West. She opened it. She took out a parcel nicely folded in a large towel.

"See here, Edward Westminster."

The rector stared as Molly shook out a dress—a gay, up-to-date dress, a young girl's dress, a very tall young girl's, for the skirts trailed on the floor as Molly held it as high as she could. It was made of a fine white muslin. There was white



"BE PREPARED FOR FINDING ALMOST ANYTHING," HE OBSERVED

lace on the bodice, and there were knots of blue ribbon scattered over the whole, knots of blue ribbon confining tiny bunches of rosebuds and daisies. These knots of blue ribbon and the little flowers made it undeniably a young girl's costume. Even in the days of all ages wearing the costumes of all ages, an older woman would have been abashed before those exceedingly youthful knots of blue ribbon and flowers.

The rector looked approvingly at it. "That is very pretty, it seems to me," he said. "That must be worth keeping, Molly."

"Worth keeping! Well, Edward Westminster, just wait. You are a man, and

of course you cannot understand how very strange it is about the dress."

The rector looked inquiringly.

"I want to know," said Molly, "if Content's Aunt Eudora had any young relative besides Content. I mean had she a grown-up young girl relative who would wear a dress like this?"

"I don't know of anybody. There might have been some relative of Eudora's first husband. No, he was an only child. I don't think it possible that Eudora had any young-girl relative."

"If she had," said Molly, firmly, "she would have kept this dress. You are sure there was nobody else living with Content's aunt at the time she died?"

"Nobody except the servants, and they were an old man and his wife."

"Then whose dress was this?"

"I don't know, Molly."

"You don't know, and I don't. It is very strange."

"I suppose," said Edward Westminster, helpless before the feminine problem, "that—Eudora got it in some way."

"In some way," repeated Molly. "That is always a man's way out of a mystery when there is a mystery. There is a mystery. There is a mystery which worries me. I have not told you all yet, Edward."

"What more is there, dear?"

"I—asked Content whose dress this was, and she said— Oh, Edward, I do so despise mysteries."

"What did she say, Molly?"

"She said it was her big sister Solly's dress."

"Her what?"

"Her big sister Solly's dress. Edward, has Content ever had a sister? Has she a sister now?"

"No, she never had a sister, and she has none now," declared the rector, emphatically. "I knew all her family. What in the world ails the child?"

"She said her big sister Solly, Edward, and the very name is so inane. If she hasn't any big sister Solly, what are we going to do?"

"Why, the child must simply lie," said the rector.

"But, Edward, I don't think she knows she lies. You may laugh, but I think she is quite sure that she has a big sister Solly, and that this is her dress. I have not told you the whole. After she came home from school to-day she went up to her room, and she left the door open, and pretty soon I heard her talking. At first I thought perhaps Lily or Amelia was up there, although I had not seen either of them come in with Content. Then after a while, when I had occasion to go up-stairs, I looked in her room, and she was quite alone, although I had heard her talking as I went up-stairs. Then I said: 'Content, I thought somebody was in your room. I heard you talking.'

"And she said, looking right into my eyes:

"'Yes, ma'am, I was talking.'

"'But there is nobody here,' I said.

"'Yes, ma'am,' she said. 'There isn't anybody here now, but my big sister Solly was here, and she is gone. You heard me talking to my big sister Solly.' I felt faint, Edward, and you know it takes a good deal to overcome me. I just sat down in Content's wicker rocking-chair. I looked at her, and she looked at me. Her eyes were just as clear and blue, and her forehead looked like truth itself. She is not exactly a pretty child, and she has a peculiar appearance, but she does certainly look truthful and good, and she looked so then. She had tried to fluff her hair over her forehead a little as I had told her, and not pull it back so tight, and she wore her new dress, and her face and hands were as clean, and she stood straight. You know she is a little inclined to stoop, and I have talked to her about it. She stood straight, and looked at me with those blue eyes, and I did feel fairly dizzy."

"What did you say?"

"Well, after a bit I pulled myself together and I said: 'My dear little girl, what is this? What do you mean about your big sister Sarah?' Edward, I could not bring myself to say that idiotic Solly. In fact, I did think I must be mistaken and had not heard correctly. But Content just looked at me as if she thought me very stupid. 'Solly,' said she. 'My sister's name is Solly.'

"'But, my dear,' I said, 'I understand that you had no sister.'

"'Yes,' said she, 'I have my big sister Solly.'

"'But where has she been all the time?' said I.

"Then Content looked at me and smiled, and it was quite a wonderful smile, Edward. She smiled as if she knew so much more than I could ever know, and quite pitied me."

"She did not answer your question?"

"No, only by that smile which seemed to tell whole volumes about that awful Solly's whereabouts, only I was too ignorant to read them.

"'Where is she now, dear?' I said, after a little.

"'She is gone now,' said Content.

"'Gone where?' said I.

"And then the child smiled at me again. Edward, what are we going to do? Is she untruthful, or has she too much

imagination? I have heard of such a thing as too much imagination, and children telling lies which were not really lies."

"So have I," agreed the rector, dryly, "but I never believed in it." The rector started to leave the room.

"What are you going to do?" inquired Molly.

"I am going to endeavor to discriminate between lies and imagination," replied the rector.

Molly plucked at his coat-sleeve as they went down-stairs. "My dear," she whispered, "I think she is asleep."

"She will have to wake up."

"But, my dear, she may be nervous. Would it not be better to wait until tomorrow?"

"I think not," said Edward Westminster. Usually an easy-going man, when he was aroused he was determined to extremes. Into Content's room he marched, Molly following. Neither of them saw their small son Jim peeping around his door. He had heard—he could not help it—the conversation earlier in the day between Content and his mother. He had also heard other things. He now felt entirely justified in listening, although he had a good code of honor. He considered himself in a way responsible, knowing what he knew, for the peace of mind of his parents. Therefore he listened, peeping around the doorway of his dark room.

The electric light flashed out from Content's room, and the little interior was revealed. It was charmingly pretty. Molly had done her best to make this not altogether welcome little stranger's room attractive. There were garlands of rosebuds swung from the top of the white satin-papered walls. There were dainty toilet things, a little dressing-table decked with ivory, a case of books, chairs cushioned with rosebud chintz, windows curtained with the same.

In the little white bed, with a rose-sprinkled coverlid over her, lay Content. She was not asleep. Directly, when the light flashed out, she looked at the rector and his wife with her clear blue eyes. Her fair hair, braided neatly and tied with pink ribbons, lay in two tails on either side of her small, certainly very good face. Her forehead was

beautiful, very white and full, giving her an expression of candor which was even noble. Content, little lonely girl among strangers in a strange place, mutely beseeching love and pity, from her whole attitude toward life and the world, looked up at Edward Westminster and Molly, and the rector realized that his determination was giving way. He began to believe in imagination, even to the extent of a sister Solly. He had never had a daughter, and sometimes the thought of one had made his heart tender. His voice was very kind when he spoke.

"Well, little girl," he said, "what is this I hear?"

Molly stared at her husband and stifled a chuckle.

As for Content, she looked at the rector and said nothing. It was obvious that she did not know what he had heard. The rector explained.

"My dear little girl," he said, "your aunt Molly"—they had agreed upon the relationship of uncle and aunt to Content—"tells me that you have been telling her about your—big sister Solly." The rector half gasped as he said Solly. He seemed to himself to be on the driving verge of idiocy before the pronunciation of that absurdly inane name.

Content's responding voice came from the pink-and-white nest in which she was snuggled, like the fluting pipe of a canary.

"Yes, sir," said she.

"My dear child," said the rector, "you know perfectly well that you have no big sister—Solly." Every time the rector said Solly he swallowed hard.

Content smiled as Molly had described her smiling. She said nothing. The rector felt reproved and looked down upon from enormous heights of innocence and childhood and the wisdom thereof. However, he persisted.

"Content," he said, "what did you mean by telling your aunt Molly what you did?"

"I was talking with my big sister Solly," replied Content, with the calmness of one stating a fundamental truth of nature.

The rector's face grew stern. "Content," he said, "look at me."

Content looked. Looking seemed to be the instinctive action which distinguished her as an individual.

"Have you a big sister—Solly?" asked the rector. His face was stern, but his voice faltered.

"Yes, sir."

"Then—tell me so."

"I have a big sister Solly," said Content. Now she spoke rather wearily, although still sweetly, as if puzzled why she had been disturbed in sleep to be asked such an obvious question.

"Where has she been all the time, that we have known nothing about her?" demanded the rector.

Content smiled. However, she spoke. "Home," said she.

"When did she come here?"

"This morning."

"Where is she now?"

Content smiled and was silent. The rector cast a helpless look at his wife. He now did not care if Molly did see that he was completely at a loss. How could a great, robust man and a clergyman be harsh to a tender little girl child in a pink-and-white nest of innocent dreams?

Molly pitied him. She spoke more harshly than her husband. "Content Adams," said she, "you know perfectly well that you have no big sister Solly. Now tell me the truth. Tell me you have no big sister Solly."

"I have a big sister Solly," said Content.

"Come, Edward," said Molly. "There is no use in staying and talking to this obstinate little girl any longer." Then she spoke to Content. "Before you go to sleep," said she, "you must say your prayers, if you have not already done so."

"I have said my prayers," replied Content, and her blue eyes were full of horrified astonishment at the suspicion.

"Then," said Molly, "you had better say them over and add something. Pray that you may always tell the truth."

"Yes, ma'am," said Content, in her little canary pipe.

The rector and his wife went out. Molly switched off the light with a snap as she passed. Out in the hall she stopped and held her husband's arms hard. "Hush!" she whispered. They both listened. They heard this, in the faintest plaint of a voice:

"They don't believe you are here, Sister Solly, but I do."

Molly dashed back into the rosebud room and switched on the light. She stared around. She opened a closet door. Then she turned off the light and joined her husband.

"There was nobody there?" he whispered.

"Of course not."

When they were back in the study the rector and his wife looked at each other.

"We will do the best we can," said Molly. "Don't worry, Edward, for you have to write your sermon to-morrow. We will manage some way. I will admit that I rather wish Content had had some other distant relative besides you who could have taken charge of her."

"You poor child!" said the rector. "It is hard on you, Molly, for she is no kith nor kin of yours."

"Indeed I don't mind," said Molly Westminster, "if only I can succeed in bringing her up."

Meantime Jim Westminster, up-stairs, sitting over his next day's algebra lesson, was even more perplexed than were his parents in the study. He paid little attention to his book. "I can manage little Lucy," he reflected, "but if the others have got hold of it, I don't know."

Presently he rose and stole very softly through the hall to Content's door. She was timid, and always left it open so she could see the hall light until she fell asleep. "Content," whispered Jim.

There came the faintest "What?" in response.

"Don't you," said Jim, in a theatrical whisper, "say another word at school to anybody about your big sister Solly. If you do, I'll whop you, if you are a girl."

"Don't care!" was sighed forth from the room.

"And I'll whop your old big sister Solly, too."

There was a tiny sob.

"I will," declared Jim. "Now you mind!"

The next day Jim cornered little Lucy Rose under a cedar-tree before school began. He paid no attention to Bubby Harvey and Tom Simmons, who were openly sniggering at him. Little Lucy gazed up at Jim, and the blue-green shade of the cedar seemed to bring out only more clearly the white-rose softness of her dear little face. Jim bent over her.



"WHY DO YOU TELL SUCH WHOPPERS? OUT WITH IT!"

"Want you to do something for me," he whispered.

Little Lucy nodded gravely.

"If my new cousin Content ever says anything to you again—I heard her yesterday—about her big sister Solly, don't you ever say a word about it to anybody else. You will promise me, won't you, little Lucy?"

A troubled expression came into little Lucy's kind eyes. "But she told Lily, and Lily told Amelia, and Amelia told

her grandmother Wheeler, and her grandmother Wheeler told Miss Parmalee when she met her on the street after school, and Miss Parmalee called on my aunt Martha and told her," said little Lucy.

"Oh, shucks!" said Jim.

"And my aunt Martha told my father that she thought perhaps she ought to ask for her when she called on your mother. She said Arnold Carruth's aunt Flora was going to call, and his aunt Dorothy. I heard Miss Acton tell Miss

Parmalee that she thought they ought to ask for her when they called on your mother, too."

"Little Lucy," he said, and lowered his voice, "you must promise me never, as long as you live, to tell what I am going to tell you."

Little Lucy looked frightened.

"Promise!" insisted Jim.

"I promise," said little Lucy, in a weak voice.

"Never, as long as you live, to tell anybody. Promise!"

"I promise."

"Now, you know if you break your promise and tell, you will be guilty of a dreadful lie and be very wicked."

Little Lucy shivered. "I never will."

"Well, my new cousin Content Adams—tells lies."

Little Lucy gasped.

"Yes, she does. She says she has a big sister Solly, and she hasn't got any big sister Solly. She never did have, and she never will have. She makes believe."

"Makes believe?" said little Lucy, in a hopeful voice.

"Making believe is just a real mean way of lying. Now I made Content promise last night never to say one word in school about her big sister Solly, and I am going to tell you this, so you can tell Lily and the others, and not lie. Of course, I don't want to lie myself, because my father is rector, and besides, mother doesn't approve of it; but if anybody is going to lie, I am the one. Now, you mind, little Lucy. Content's big sister Solly has gone away, and she is never coming back. If you tell Lily and the others I said so, I can't see how you will be lying."

Little Lucy gazed at the boy. She looked like truth incarnate. "But," said she, in her adorable stupidity of innocence, "I don't see how she could go away if she was never here, Jim."

"Oh, of course she couldn't. But all you have to do is to say that you heard me say she had gone. Don't you understand?"

"I don't understand how Content's big sister Solly could possibly go away if she was never here."

"Little Lucy, I wouldn't ask you to tell a lie for the world, but if you were just to say that you heard me say—"

"I think it would be a lie," said little Lucy, "because how can I help knowing if she was never here she couldn't—"

"Oh, well, little Lucy," cried Jim, in despair, still with tenderness—how could he be anything but tender with little Lucy?—"all I ask is never to say anything about it."

"If they ask me?"

"Anyway, you can hold your tongue. You know it isn't wicked to hold your tongue."

Little Lucy absurdly stuck out the pointed tip of her little red tongue. Then she shook her head slowly.

"Well," she said, "I will hold my tongue."

This encounter with innocence and logic had left him worsted. Jim could see no way out of the fact that his father, the rector, his mother, the rector's wife, and he, the rector's son, were disgraced by their relationship to such an unsanctified little soul as this queer Content Adams.

And yet he looked at the poor lonely little girl, who was trying very hard to learn her lessons, who suggested in her very pose and movement a little, scared rabbit ready to leap the road for some bush of hiding, and while he was angry with her he pitied her. He had no doubts concerning Content's keeping her promise. He was quite sure that she would now say nothing whatever about that big sister Solly to the others, but he was not prepared for what happened that very afternoon.

When he went home from school his heart stood still to see Miss Martha Rose, and Arnold Carruth's aunt Flora, and his aunt, who was not his aunt, Miss Dorothy Vernon, who was visiting her, all walking along in state with their lace-trimmed parasols, their white gloves, and their nice card-cases. Jim jumped a fence and raced across lots home, and gained on them. He burst in on his mother, sitting on the porch, which was inclosed by wire netting overgrown with a budding vine. It was the first warm day of the season.

"Mother," cried Jim Westminster—"mother, they are coming."

"Who, for goodness' sake, Jim?"

"Why, Arnold's aunt Flora and his aunt Dorothy and little Lucy's aunt Martha. They are coming to call."

Involuntarily Molly's hand went up to smooth her pretty hair. "Well, what of it, Jim?" said she.

"Mother, they will ask for—big sister Solly!"

Molly Westminster turned pale. "How do you know?"

"Mother, Content has been talking at school. A lot know. You will see they will ask for—"

"Run right in and tell Content to stay in her room," whispered Molly, hastily, for the callers, their white-kidded hands holding their card-cases genteelly, were coming up the walk.

Molly advanced, smiling. She put a brave face on the matter, but she realized that she, Molly Westminster, who had never been a coward, was positively afraid before this absurdity. The callers sat with her on the pleasant porch, with the young vine-shadows making networks over their best gowns. Tea was served presently by the maid, and much to Molly's relief, before the maid appeared came the inquiry. Miss Martha Rose made it.

"We would be pleased to see Miss Solly Adams also," said Miss Martha.

Flora Carruth echoed her. "I was so glad to hear another nice girl had come to the village," said she, with enthusiasm. Miss Dorothy Vernon said something indefinite to the same effect.

"I am sorry," replied Molly, with an effort, "but there is no Miss Solly Adams here now." She spoke the truth as nearly as she could manage, without unraveling the whole ridiculous affair. The callers sighed with regret, tea was served with little cakes, and they fluttered down the walk, holding their card-cases, and that ordeal was over.

But Molly sought the rector in his study, and she was trembling. "Edward," she cried out, regardless of her husband's sermon, "something must be done now."

"Why, what is the matter, Molly?"

"People are—calling on her."

"Calling on whom?"

"Big sister—Solly!" Molly explained.

"Well, don't worry, dear," said the rector. "Of course, we will do something, but we must think it over. Where is the child now?"

"She and Jim are out in the garden.

I saw them pass the window just now. Jim is such a dear boy, he tries hard to be nice to her. Edward Westminster, we ought not to wait."

"My dear, we must."

Meantime Jim and Content Adams were out in the garden. Jim had gone to Content's door and tapped and called out, rather rudely: "Content, I say, put on your hat and come along out in the garden. I've got something to tell you."

"Don't want to," protested Content's little voice, faintly.

"You come right along."

And Content came along. She was an obedient child, and she liked Jim, although she stood much in awe of him. She followed him into the garden back of the rectory, and they sat down on the bench beneath the weeping willow. The minute they were seated Jim began to talk.

"Now," said he, "I want to know."

Content glanced up at him, then looked down and turned pale.

"I want to know, honest Injun," said Jim, "what you are telling such awful whoppers about your old big sister Solly for?"

Content was silent. This time she did not smile, a tear trickled out of her right eye and ran over the pale cheek.

"Because you know," said Jim, observant of the tear, but ruthless, "that you haven't any big sister Solly, and never did have. You are getting us all in an awful mess over it, and father is rector here, and mother is his wife, and I am his son, and you are his niece, and it is downright mean. Why do you tell such whoppers? Out with it!"

Content was trembling violently. "I lived with Aunt Eudora," she whispered.

"Well, what of that? Other folks have lived with their aunts and not told whoppers."

"They haven't lived with Aunt Eudora."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Content Adams, and you the rector's niece, talking that way about dead folks."

"I don't mean to talk about poor Aunt Eudora," fairly sobbed Content. "Aunt Eudora was a real good aunt, but she was grown up. She was a good deal more grown up than your mother; she really was, and when I first went to live with

her, I was 'most a little baby; I couldn't speak—plain, and I had to go to bed real early, and slept 'way off from everybody, and I used to be afraid—all alone, and so—"

"Well, go on," said Jim, but his voice was softer. It was hard lines for a little kid, especially if she was a girl.

"And so," went on the little, plaintive voice, "I got to thinking how nice it would be if I only had a big sister, and I used to cry and say to myself—I couldn't speak plain, you know, I was so little: 'Big sister would be real solly.' And then first thing I knew—she came."

"Who came?"

"Big sister Solly."

"What rot! She didn't come. Content Adams, you know she didn't come."

"She must have come," persisted the little girl, in a frightened whisper. "She must have. Oh, Jim, you don't know. Big sister Solly must have come, or I would have died like my father and mother."

Jim's arm, which was near her, twitched convulsively, but he did not put it around her.

"She did—co-me," sobbed Content. "Big sister Solly did come."

"Well, have it so," said Jim, suddenly. "No use going over that any longer. Have it she came, but she ain't here now, anyway. Content Adams, you can't look me in the face and tell me that."

Content looked at Jim, and her little face was almost terrible, so full of bewilderment and fear it was. "Jim," whispered Content, "I can't have big sister Solly not be here. I can't send her away. What would she think?"

Jim stared. "Think? Why, she isn't alive to think, anyhow!"

"I can't make her—dead," sobbed Content. "She came when I wanted her, and now when I don't so much, when I've got Uncle Edward and Aunt Molly and you, and don't feel so dreadful lonesome, I can't be so bad as to make her dead."

Jim whistled. Then his face brightened up. He looked at Content with a shrewd and cheerful grin. "See here, kid, you say your sister Solly is big, grown up, don't you?" he inquired.

Content nodded pitifully.

"Then why, if she is grown up and pretty, don't she have a beau?"

Content stopped sobbing and gave him a quick glance.

"Then—why doesn't she get married, and go out West to live?"

Jim chuckled. Instead of a sob, a faint echo of his chuckle came from Content.

Jim laughed merrily. "I say, Content," he cried, "let's have it she's married now, and gone?"

"Well," said Content.

Jim put his arm around her very nicely and protectingly. "It's all right, then," said he, "as all right as it can be for a girl. Say, Content, ain't it a shame you aren't a boy?"

"I can't help it," said Content, meekly.

"You see," said Jim, thoughtfully, "I don't as a rule care much about girls, but if you could coast down-hill and skate, and do a few things like that, you would be almost as good as a boy."

Content surveyed him, and her pessimistic little face assumed upward curves. "I will," said she. "I will do anything, Jim. I will fight if you want me to, just like a boy."

"I don't believe you could lick any of us fellers unless you get a good deal harder in the muscles," said Jim, eying her thoughtfully; "but we'll play ball, and maybe by and by you can begin with Arnold Carruth."

"Could lick him now," said Content.

But Jim's face sobered before her readiness. "Oh no, you mustn't go to fighting right away," said he. "It wouldn't do. You really are a girl, you know, and father is rector."

"Then I won't," said Content; "but I *could* knock down that little boy with curls; I know I could."

"Well, you needn't. I'll like you just as well. You see, Content"—Jim's voice faltered, for he was a boy, and on the verge of sentiment before which he was shamed—"you see, Content, now your big sister Solly is married and gone out West, why, you can have me for your brother, and of course a brother is a good deal better than a sister."

"Yes," said Content, eagerly.

"I am going," said Jim, "to marry Lucy Rose when I grow up, but I haven't got any sister, and I'd like you first rate for one. So I'll be your big brother instead of your cousin."



Drawn by Worth Brehm

A LITTLE PEAL OF LAUGHTER CAME FROM THE SOFT MUSLIN FOLDS

"Big brother Solly?"

"Say, Content, that is an awful name, but I don't care. You're only a girl. You can call me anything you want to, but you mustn't call me Solly when there is anybody within hearing."

"I won't."

"Because it wouldn't do," said Jim, with weight.

"I never will, honest," said Content.

Presently they went into the house. Dr. Trumbull was there; he had been talking seriously to the rector and his wife. He had come over on purpose.

"It is a perfect absurdity," he said, "but I made ten calls this morning, and everywhere I was asked about that little Adams girl's big sister—why you keep her hidden. They have a theory that she is either an idiot or dreadfully disfigured. I had to tell them I know nothing about it."

"There isn't any girl," said the rector, wearily. "Molly, do explain."

Dr. Trumbull listened. "I have known such cases," he said, when Molly had finished.

"What did you do for them?" Molly asked, anxiously.

"Nothing. Such cases have to be cured by time. Children get over these fancies when they grow up."

"Do you mean to say that we have to put up with big sister Solly until Content is grown up?" asked Molly, in a desperate tone. And then Jim came in. Content had run up-stairs.

"It is all right, mother," said Jim.

Molly caught him by the shoulders.

"Oh, Jim, has she told you?"

Jim gave briefly, and with many omissions, an account of his conversation with Content.

"Did she say anything about that dress, Jim?" asked Molly.

"She said her aunt had meant it for that out-West rector's daughter Alice to graduate in, but Content wanted it for her big sister Solly, and told the rector's wife it was hers. Content says she knows she was a naughty girl, but after she had said it she was afraid to say it wasn't so. Mother, I think that poor little thing is scared 'most to death."

"Nobody is going to hurt her," said Molly. "Goodness, that rector's wife was so conscientious that she even let that dress go. Well, I can send it right back, and the girl will have it in time for her graduation, after all. Jim, dear, call the poor child down. Tell her nobody is going to scold her." Molly's voice was very tender.

Jim returned with Content. She had on a little, ruffled pink gown which seemed to reflect color on her cheeks. She wore an inscrutable expression, at once child-like and charming. She looked shy, furtively amused, yet happy. Molly realized that the pessimistic, downward lines had disappeared, that Content was really a pretty little girl.

Molly put an arm around the small, pink figure. "So you and Jim have been talking, dear?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," replied little Content. "Jim is my big brother—" She just caught herself before she said Solly.

"And your sister Solly is married and living out West?" said Molly.

"Yes," said Content, with a long breath. "My sister Solly is married." Smiles broke all over her little face. She hid it in Molly's skirts, and a little peal of laughter like a bird-trill came from the soft muslin folds.

